

Veterans Services: Tremendous Need, Limited Resources

TRACY MURRAY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With more than 300,000 veterans in the San Francisco Bay Area, 72,000 of whom live in Alameda County, county personnel are uniquely challenged to provide support to this population. Today's veterans have more injuries, more brain trauma, and especially in the case of female veterans, a high percentage of sexual trauma. With the end of the Gulf War, thousands of veterans are anticipated to return home. While monetary and medical benefits are available from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), many veterans are unaware of their eligibility or reluctant to engage, with another government office. Older veterans, who may have service-related disabilities, have the obstacle of substantiating claims with records that are 30-40 years old or missing. The USDVA has a dismal record of

processing claims, with the local regional office now taking 320 days to issue an initial ruling.

County personnel, through the County Veterans Services Offices (CVSOs), offer assistance to veterans by helping them evaluate eligibility for assistance and then filing claims. Unfortunately, CVSOs do not receive any federal dollars and across the State of California only receive 12% of their budgets from state funds. This lack of funding leaves county offices extremely vulnerable as counties' discretionary dollars dwindle. With a high-staff turnover, layoff of a management position, and low reported performance, the Alameda County CVSO is challenged to improve its operations in order to continue to provide much needed services and demonstrate its value in the community.

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Introduction

The State of California has 1.9 million veterans, more than any other state in the nation. With 72,000 veterans, Alameda County ranks as the eighth largest veteran population in the state. Veterans newly separating from service show unique and alarming characteristics, with 25% of Gulf War II veterans having a disability connected with their service, as compared to 13% of all other veterans. Twenty percent of infantry and 10% of all other returning troops suffer from at least a mild brain injury. Approximately 1/3 of military women have experienced sexual trauma while in service, with the perpetrators usually within their own military units. Vietnam veterans are now aging, and according to a 2012 needs assessment conducted by the Alameda County Area Agency on Aging, one in three seniors in Alameda County is either a veteran or a family member of a veteran. In January 2011, veterans comprised 12% of Alameda County's homeless population living on the street. The demand for services for this population is great, but counties are severely challenged by a lack of funding.

History

Veterans discharged from military service may be eligible for benefits, many of which are provided by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), which offers three main categories of assistance: 1) monetary benefits for disability connected to service and pension benefits for low-income veterans who served during periods of war; 2) medical care; and 3) burial benefits. State agencies offer assistance as well, including college fee waivers, exemptions for license and registration fees, and home and farm loans. In addition to the USDVA benefits, there are over 1,170 federal domestic assistance

programs.¹ The Code of Federal Regulations used as a reference to determine legislated benefits is over 2,000 pages long.

Veterans and their dependents are frequently unaware of the benefits that they deserve, and if they try to obtain benefits, they can be overwhelmed by the complex navigation required to understand eligibility requirements and submit claims for assistance. Many veterans with mental health conditions, or service-related trauma, are reluctant to interact with the USDVA because of their perception that it is a military organization. Veterans who do submit claims are frustrated by USDVA's tremendous backlog for evaluating claims. The Oakland Regional Office, one of four regional centers in California, has an average wait of 320 days for a disability claim to be processed, compared to a national target of 180 days. The same office has a 39% error rate for processing claims.² If a claim is denied, the subsequent appeal process may last for years. For newly separated veterans, the obstacles encountered in seeking help are daunting and remain a significant barrier to service.

In recognition of this long standing challenge, the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA) works in partnership with a network of County Veterans Services Offices (CVSOs) whose personnel are charged with helping veterans identify the benefits for which they are eligible and assist them with filing claims. CVSO personnel, who are county employees, undertake a rigorous training program and are required to pass a written examination before they are accredited by the CDVA to assist and represent veterans. Their assistance includes

¹ Data provided by in the *2011 Annual Report and Directory* published by the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Inc.

² *Contra Costa Times*: 5/11/2012

serving as the veteran's selected Power of Attorney in submitting documents and appealing decisions. On a statewide basis, the CVSO's assistance in obtaining benefits for their clients resulted in bringing in \$328 million in federal funds to California communities in fiscal year 2011.

This county-based system, while providing an extremely important service, is not mandated by legislation, so counties are not required to maintain an office. Funding for the program is minimal, with CDVA providing about 12% of program budgets statewide. CDVA's funds are allocated based on the number of "workload units," which are based on particular forms submitted, that each CVSO provides. The overall amount of funding is limited, only \$2.6 million, so even high performing offices receive a small state allocation and are therefore required to provide a substantial amount of general fund dollars.

Alameda County historically has had a low number of workload units as compared to its surrounding jurisdictions, and as a result, has a larger discrepancy between its program revenue and expense. Current projections anticipate a fiscal year funding ratio of 10% state and 90% county. These facts, coupled with a 100% turnover of personnel in the department in the last five years and budget based elimination of the management position within the department, provoked a strong interest in visiting with San Mateo's CVSO to learn more about their operations and collaboration with the Workforce Investment Board (WIB).

Program

The San Mateo CVSO is comprised of two people, a Veterans Service Officer and a Veterans Service Representative. The unit is managed by a senior manager within the social services department. Although the office is small, it has a long history of collaboration with community partners, and its personnel are actively involved with numerous programs. Their successful collaborations include the imminent launch of a Veterans Treatment Court, where veterans with substance abuse and mental health issues are diverted to treatment programs.

In 2011, the San Mateo County WIB successfully applied for a \$465,000 grant that involved collaboration with the CVSO, Cañada College, San Francisco State University, and numerous employers, including NASA. The program, Bay Bridge to Engineering for Veterans, provides tuition and educational materials for veterans, with preference given to veterans released from service within the previous 48 months. The core program includes 7-10 courses in math, science and engineering. After completion of the initial program, participants may either receive a Certificate in Surveying and Computer-Aided Design or they may elect to continue their education. WIB staff members have secured the possibility of paid internships at NASA for program participants who complete the program.

The grant was launched in 2011 with 35 participant slots available. Midway through the project, the feedback is mixed. An initial obstacle was finding program participants. The short time frame between the grant award and program implementation was an obstacle in recruiting applicants to the program. A further barrier was the level of knowledge required to participate in the classes, which included calculus and physics. Participants were required to demonstrate proficiency. Although 70 potential applicants attended introductory meetings, only 30 followed up with a group intake meeting, and, of those, 15 people started the program. WIB personnel facilitate weekly case management meetings. In order to increase participation, they have broadened the eligibility requirements for participants. As of May 2012, 21 students were enrolled with the program. The prospect of a paid internship at NASA is very appealing for participants and addresses one of the obstacles that students cannot afford to be unemployed for a continued period of time.

The WIB perspective of the program is that it offers an innovative partnership between public and private sectors and that it offers veterans an educational track that either increases their short-term employment opportunities or places them in a strong position to continue their education. The San Mateo CVSO is in support of the program and has included

information about it in their outreach efforts. The office does not receive any funds from the grant. Although they appreciate the program goals, they have not seen how it fits the needs of their typical client, and as a result have not been successful in referring candidates to the program.

The San Mateo CVSO has a veteran population of 34,704, which ranks 16th out of 55 counties in the state. Their workload units are approximately the same as the Alameda CVSO, which has approximately twice as many veterans. The concept of workload unit is controversial within the CVSO network. CDVA establishes two categories of workload units: subvention, which establishes a workload unit of "1" for most claim documents, and Medi-Cal cost avoidance, which establishes workload units of far greater value for veterans' claims generated for veterans who are seeking Medi-Cal and general assistance benefits. This policy is a result of the state and local government's interest in obtaining federal benefits for veterans that would presumably lessen local financial obligations.

The San Mateo Veterans Service Officer believes that a more equitable allocation of state funds would be based on population counts. That is an interesting proposition, and, if implemented, would bring the allocation policy in line with other programs within county government. Changing the policy, though, does not appear to be of great interest within the CVSO community and would not have a dramatic impact, given that the overall funding pool is limited. Using workload units does provide a method to easily compare the activities of each, and it is that comparison which highlights that Alameda County is under-performing in comparison to other Bay Area jurisdictions. The concern about this situation prompted this particular case study in San Mateo County and also resulted in numerous conversations with other organizations, including the Contra Costa County Veterans Service Office, the Solano County Veterans Service Office, and the California Department of Veterans Affairs. All conversations centered on seeking advice about best practices.

Recommendations

The Alameda CVSO is staffed with three Veterans Service Representatives and one specialist clerk. The department is one of two departments managed by a senior manager within the Adult, Aging and Medi-Cal Service Division of Social Services. The staff members are relatively new and are highly motivated to improve the performance and reputation of the department. After meeting with numerous personnel, including senior managers with Alameda County, the following strategies are recommended:

- Support collaborative grant opportunities that provide additional resources for veterans. Where possible request that some of the funds are available for the Veterans Service Office.
- Utilize the San Mateo CVSO process for verifying whether general assistance applicants are in receipt of veterans' benefits and then entering the information in a web-based application that will then track subsequent activities with these clients. This will help generate more workload units.
- Develop specialized outreach for the general assistance clients that are veterans in order to invite them to work with the CVSO staff to determine eligibility for veterans' benefits.
- Develop outreach materials for long-term care facilities to make them aware that veterans may be eligible for "Aid and Attendance," which provides monetary compensation for disabled veterans. In the correspondence, address the potential for scams by non-CVSO staff who prey on elderly veterans.
- Increase outreach by developing an email list for veterans and their family members that wish to receive electronic information.
- Include information specifically for Veterans in the Area Agency on Aging published resource materials.
- Accept the Contra Costa CVSO invitation to bring team members to their office to shadow their operational approach.

- Accept the CDVA invitation to have experienced personnel visit the Alameda County office to view operations and make recommendations for increased performance.
- Work with the Alameda County Veterans Commission and Board of Supervisors to advocate for legislative changes to provide more compensation for CVSOs.

Conclusion

This case study provided an opportunity to review other jurisdictions' approaches to providing important services for veterans on a limited budget. The networking opportunity, which included the county identified in the BASSC program, as well as personnel from Contra Costa County, Solano County, and the California Department of Veterans Affairs, was invaluable in helping to formulate a plan to redefine the approach and goals of the Alameda County Veterans Service Office.

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